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Remarks by U.S. Congresswoman Betty McCollum
"National Security for Yemen and the U.S. in the Twenty-First Century"
February 19, 2011
Sana'a, Yemen

As-Salaamu Alaykum (Peace be upon you).

Your Excellency Prime Minister Dr. Mujawr, Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr. Al Qirbi, Mr. Al Ansi (Director of the Office of the President, Director of the National Security Bureau, Rep. of Yemen), Dr. Al-Amri (Al Shura Council and Sana'a University, Professor, Republic of Yemen), Mr. Al-Dhabbi (Prime Deputy Minister, Republic of Yemen, Head of the Bilateral Seminar), Staff Major General Al-Ashwal (Chief of General Staff, Yemen Army), Ambassador Feierstein (U.S. Ambassador to Yemen), Ambassador Krajewski (Senior Vice President, U.S. National Defense University), Ambassador Laracco (Director, Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies), Dr. Abdellatif (Chief, Regional Program Division Regional Bureau for Arab States, United Nations Development Program)

Distinguished guests including the Members of the Council of Ministers, Members of the House of Representatives, Representatives from Yemeni society, Embassy personnel and also to the gathered representatives of the High Military Academy, workshop participants, and NESAs Alumni – it is an honor for me to be here in Sana'a addressing this distinguished audience of leaders.

Today, I address you as one member of the United States Congress. My words are my own – the words of an American who believes it is in my country's interest that the people of Yemen live in peace with economic opportunity, and hope for the future.

For a long-time I have been urged to make this journey and see Yemen for myself. In recent years, two staff members in my office have visited your country. They told me of Yemen's special beauty, culture, and hospitality. They told me of the warmth of the Yemeni people. They briefed me on your country's challenges and the need for international partners to provide support.

Now I am here, and I look forward to with you all as a partner to build a stronger relationship between our countries. And, because of the valuable work being done by NESAs, I will be working for a relationship based on shared security, enhanced development, and a stronger partnership for the future.

As a visitor to Yemen, I want my words to be respectful. The Republic of Yemen is a sovereign nation and I respect your sovereignty. The future of your country is for you and your fellow citizens to decide.

But, I want my comments today to be direct and honest.

We are living in a time of great social and political change in the Middle East. The political transformation that has just taken place in Tunisia and Egypt was once unimaginable, but is now a reality. Leaders once all powerful have fallen. Peoples once silenced have risen to speak with a single voice – a voice calling out for respect, reform, and change. Young people across the Arab world – intelligent, talented, and determined – want to control their own futures.

This desire for political reform, economic opportunity, and effective governance is a reality in Yemen as well. This week Americans have been reading about protests in Yemen on the front pages of our newspapers. Americans are seeing video of the protests in the streets of Sana'a. With President Saleh's announcement that he will leave the presidency in 2013, America will be expecting the path forward to result in an open, democratic transition.

With my government facing a budget crisis, questions will be raised in Congress about the effectiveness of funding going to Yemen. Many in Congress will need to know much more about your country than they do now. America's view of Yemen is dictated by media reports about Al Qaeda, reporting that ignores the many complex issues your government is facing.

This lack of understanding needs to change. At the same time, the U.S. needs to clearly state our policy priorities in Yemen.

This conference and the work of NESA are very important to achieve a better understanding of our respective interests and policy goals.

Last month, U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton visited Yemen and made an important statement. Secretary Clinton said, *"We seek a unified, stable, democratic and prosperous Yemen where civil society has room to operate and Al-Qaida does not – where individuals are free to express their opinions, even when they differ, but are committed to resolving those differences peacefully through the political process."*

National security and stability are at the core of Secretary Clinton's statement – security for both the U.S. and Yemen.

For the U.S., confronting terrorism is a vital national security interest. Denying Al Qaeda sanctuary in Yemen is a priority. We must make sure that the U.S. – Yemen military-to-military relationship can achieve our shared goals. The U.S. must continue making investments in training a professional Yemeni security forces to combat terrorist threats.

At the same time, if the U.S. only focuses on combating hundreds of terrorists, ignoring the real needs of 24 million Yemenis, we will have failed.

Building a national security strategy cannot be achieved by military capacity and weapons alone. National security must also focus on improving the lives of average citizens, investing in Yemen's future, and ensuring the donor community is united in preventing your country from failing.

While America focuses on Al Qaeda, the greatest security threats facing most Yemenis in their daily lives is not terrorism, as you all know. The terror too many of your citizens face is extreme poverty, hunger, illiteracy, chronic unemployment, or life without water.

As a woman, I think of the thousands of Yemeni mothers who must face the terror of dying while giving birth because of a lack of access to health care. Or, I think about the terror of a little girl who should be going to school, but is instead forced into marriage to a man years or decades older.

In my opinion, developing a national security strategy must address the security needs of not only the government, but the people as well. It should be obvious to all of us that people who live without hope or the prospect of a better life are focused on survival, not national security. For a national security strategy to have significance it must actually respond to the most serious threats facing a nation and its people, which raises important questions for consideration.

How is Yemen going to create an environment for investment and job creation, for health, for education, for civil society, for gender equality, and security?

As you develop a national security strategy, how are you going to address these issues in the coming decades?

These are questions for you to consider. Addressing the real needs of the Yemeni people is vital to the immediate future of your country. For example, I have read that in the year 2050 – years into the future – at the current population rate, there will be over 53 million people in Yemen.

Where will the water, the food, and the jobs come from to sustain a near doubling of your population?

These are not small issues. These are long-term security issues and addressing them must start immediately because the consequences of not acting will lead to disaster. With the commitment of your military and your ministries, and the support of NESAC, the Government of Yemen will develop a security strategy based on a whole of government approach. This work is important because there must be Yemeni solutions to Yemen's problems.

At the same time, Yemen is a low-income country and cannot be expected to make significant progress without a sustained partnership from the international donor community. I will urge President Obama and the U.S. Congress to be a partner in both military training and the development activities that can help achieve results for the people of Yemen.

This week President Obama was asked about the turbulent political situation in the Middle East.

President Obama said: *"The world is changing...you have a young, vibrant generation within the Middle East that is looking for greater opportunity... And so...if young people, if ordinary folks end up feeling that there are pathways for them to feed their families, get a decent job, get an education, aspire to a better life. And the more steps these governments are taking to provide these avenues for mobility and opportunity, the more stable these countries are."*

I share President Obama's desire for stability and opportunity for the people of Yemen and the entire Middle East. But to achieve this goal it will take strong, courageous leadership by everyone here today. You will need to work together for the common purpose of advancing security and making the necessary reforms to unite Yemenis behind a stable democratic future.

Yes, Al Qaeda must be defeated, but that is not enough. Attacking poverty, improving the status of women, and attracting investments to create jobs must also be considered priorities that enhance your country's security and future.

I want Yemen must be successful. The world community needs to stand with you. We all know the work ahead will be difficult and it will take time, but it must be done. It must be done because the future of your country and the Yemeni people depends upon you. And, as you work together across government ministries to secure your country's future, please know you have a Member of Congress in Washington who is ready and willing to work with you.

Thank you, and may God's blessings be upon the people of Yemen and the people of the United States.

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